

ORNITHOLOGICAL LITERATURE

THE EMERGENCE OF ORNITHOLOGY AS A SCIENTIFIC DISCIPLINE: 1760–1850. By Paul Lawrence Farber. D. Reidel Publ. Co., Dordrecht, Holland; Boston, Massachusetts; and London, England, 1982:191 pp., 4 black-and-white plates. \$39.50.—For some years Dr. Paul Lawrence Farber has been interested in the transformation of the earlier undisciplined study of “natural history” into a set of separate scientific specialities during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. This was a time of profound change in western Europe brought about by the French revolution of 1789 and the later, less abrupt but equally pervasive British industrial revolution, which made so many changes in all aspects of agricultural, commercial, and social conditions in western Europe.

In this book Farber presents a case study of the emergence of one of these disciplines—ornithology—chosen because it was among the first and most important areas of natural history to emerge as a serious and well-organized subject. The year 1760, at which this study opens, saw the publication of Mathurin Jacques Brisson’s massive six-volume compendium on all that was then known about birds, “Ornithologie, ou Methode contenant la division des oiseaux en ordres, sections, genres, especes and leurs varietes.” Brisson felt that all the earlier writings on birds were either too inaccurate, or too limited in scope, and generally out of date in their factual presentations, and that the time had come for a new and more comprehensive and reliable compilation. His approach to ornithology was from the perspective of a museum curator, a collection catalogue, much expanded and completed to be sure, but still a rather prosaic description of the external appearance of each of the hundreds of species treated, with emphasis on previously unknown “new” species, and with a new and greatly broadened classification.

Brisson’s effort was soon eclipsed by a much larger work by Georges Louis Leclerc, comte de Buffon, whose “Histoire Naturelle . . . avec la description du Cabinet du Roi,” beginning in 1749 and closing in 1804, had a total of 44 volumes. Buffon’s approach to natural history was much broader (not limited just to birds), and included all available information on the habits, geographic ranges, etc., of each species treated, as well as descriptions of their plumage and general appearance. It exerted a wider influence on the intellectual classes of the time than did Brisson’s less readable, less “literary” tomes. Furthermore, it caused many of his well-placed and influential readers to encourage societies and even governments to support and to send out numerous exploring and collecting expeditions to little known regions. These eventually expanded the collections of specimens and of pertinent observations about the fauna of the world. The appearance of Brisson’s and Buffon’s works was fortunately timed as natural history became quite fashionable at that time, and the knowledge of the birds of the world grew very rapidly as a result.

Farber gives many details of this dramatic increase in ornithological knowledge. He documents the growth of research collections, both in size and number, and the multiplication of scholarly books and journals. With these great additions there resulted first a new and improved classification, and then a diverse series of studies of the habits and distribution of birds. These developments gave ornithology a scientific and well-organized status as a serious discipline.

As an historian of science and of society, Farber examines this one science in terms of its institutional developments, its links with colonization in a period of much “empire building,” and its place with other intellectual interests in a rapidly changing society. It is a book designed more for the historians of science, as a part of culture, than for ornithologists alone.—HERBERT FRIEDMANN.